

HABS  
VA,  
44-RICH  
99-

Richmond City Hall (Courts Building)(Old City Hall)  
1001 East Broad Street  
Richmond (Independent City)  
Virginia

HABS No. VA-34

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

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NAME: Richmond City Hall  
Courts Building  
Old City Hall

LOCATION: 1001 East Broad Street  
Bounded by Broad Street  
10th Street, Capitol Street and 11th Street  
Richmond, (Ind. City) Virginia

PRESENT OWNER: City of Richmond

PRESENT OCCUPANT: None

PRESENT USE: Vacant

SIGNIFICANCE:

The Richmond City Hall was built in 1886 thru 1894 from the competition winning design of nationally known Architect, Elijah E. Myers (1832-1909) in 1883-1884. The building occupies an entire city block near the Virginia Capitol grounds and measures 170 feet by 140 feet. Stylistically, the structure is High Victorian Gothic, four stories in height. Its rugged silhouette has four corner towers of varying designs culminating at the northwest corner with the clock tower which rises to 195 feet. Constructed of stone, brick and cast iron, the exterior effect of the style is achieved by contrasting the texture of the locally quarried granite. The main facade of the structure faces north while the interior is organized to be entered from the west. The most notable interior feature of the structure is a rectangular skylighted courtyard, bridged across the center and surrounded by arcaded galleries. The west light well is open through the full four stories while the east is filled with the grand staircase. Almost all the original fixtures remain intact. "Among American municipal buildings of its size and style, the Richmond City Hall has no superior in similarly unaltered condition" (NHL Forum).

The building is presently unoccupied and in the process of being adaptively reused. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a National Historic Landmark.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION: PART I

Richmond City Hall was constructed between September 1, 1886 and February 15, 1894. The 7½ year construction period culminated efforts started almost 16 years before the groundbreaking when first, the original city hall was suspected of being unsafe and second, the need for a new city hall was addressed.

A structural failure in a balcony of the state capitol in 1870, which killed or injured several prominent individuals brought all Greek Revival structures in the city under suspicion. The first city hall was erroneously thought to be unsound and by 1874 had been razed.

In 1877 Council began investigating a new city hall with committees being formed to look into costs and design. A public referendum held on May 25, 1882, allocating \$300,000.00 for the new building, passed 1,324 to 964. By February 23, 1883, the Finance Committee was allocated the money. A competition was held and within 9 months plans were opened.

Two plans that were estimated within the budget, and a third by Elijah Myers estimated at \$321,340.00 were submitted to Council. On

HISTORICAL INFORMATION CONT'D.:

January 4, 1884, Myers was declared the winner. The design submitted was then changed from a brick exterior building above the first floor to an all stone facade.

Bids were taken in both August and December of 1884. None were within the budget. Myers plans were rejected and a new competition was held.

On May 7, 1885 the design of the Boston firm of Wait and Cutter was selected. Working drawings were produced by March of 1886.

In August of 1886, City Council gave the authority to the Grounds and Building's Committees, "to proceed with building with one of the plans now in possession." Myers' plans were chosen again by the committee.

Construction was started with day labor under the supervision of the city engineer after the groundbreaking. The Richmond Dispatch of September 2, 1886 described the groundbreaking of the previous day and a letter account of the ceremony is available from the Richmond Public Library.

By April 5, 1887 the cornerstone was laid deep in the northwest corner of the foundation. A ceremony was held and a book containing the

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the speeches and describing the event was printed by the Everett Wadley Company.

In the spring of 1887 the City was sued by Wait and Cutter for \$7,000.00 for services rendered. In July a judgement of \$3,100.00 was rendered against the City. By October, Myers was being investigated regarding a fee of \$1,500.00 paid to a Mr. Clinton DePriest for his supposed influence. Cost problems were already noticeable. By November, Architect's plans and fees totalled \$20,142.23.

Construction proceeded slowly and costly. Clocks were installed in the tower by 1890.

Eventually the delays and overruns were so severe that Council investigated the matter in August of 1892. They concluded that the, "cost overruns were due to blunders, alterations and omissions."

The building was finally dedicated in Council Chambers on February 15, 1894. Totally cost of the project \$1,318,349.19.

ARCHITECT:

Elijah E. Myers (1832-1909), the Architect of Richmond's City Hall was trained as a carpenter in Philadelphia prior to the Civil War. In relocating west, he established himself as an Architect with a specialization in public structures. Initially located in Springfield, Ill., Myers moved to Chicago, Ill., in the late 1860's and then permanently located in Detroit, Michigan around 1872. A businessman and "seller of buildings" he was noted as superb draftsman, known for his creative compositions more so than academic correctness of designs.

Myers, who initially worked alone, developed a successful practice which eventually employed his son and seven draftsman. During a career that spanned three decades, he is credited with designing over 100 courthouses, mostly in the midwest, as well as the state capitols of Michigan (1871), Texas (1881), Colorado and Idaho (1883) and the Parliament Buildings in Rio de Janerio, Brazil.

Myers, a successful businessman, was never held in the highest esteem by the profession. Much of his success was due to his ability to find clients and promote himself, as well as a willingness to sue both competitors and clients if he felt he had been wronged. He prided himself on the ability to guarantee his work. Interestingly, Myers is

ARCHITECT CONT'D.:

the Architect of the Macoupin County Court House in Carlinville, Illinois. Built in 1867-70, and budgeted at \$50,000, the building took forty years to pay for since it cost over \$1.5 million. The suggested cause of the overrun in this case is graft, in the case of Richmond's City Hall, a similar explanation for the overruns is given. In Myers' defense, the Michigan State Capitol was built ahead of schedule and under budget.



BUILDING CONTRACTOR, SUPPLIES:

Richmond City Hall was built using day labor by the City, a contractor was not hired. The project was supervised by the City Engineer - Col (C.S.A.) Wilfred E. Cutshaw and assigned by Supervising Architect - C.P.E. Burgwyn. Capt. William C. Wilkinson was initially appointed foreman of the work but immediately resigned. Captain H.C. Toot was then named foreman.

Materials were provided locally, the granite quarried from along the James River and was cut and shaped at the site. The cast iron was done in Richmond by Asa Snyder.

The electrical work was subcontracted to the Southern Electrical Co. of Baltimore, Md., under the supervision of V.H. Neal, Engineer.

Several firms were involved in the production of the structural beams, generally on a floor by floor basis. These include the Phoenix Iron Co., the New Jersey Street L Co., and the Penna. Constr. Co.

ORIGINAL PLANS AND CONSTRUCTION:

As noted on the statement of significance, the structure is nearly unaltered. Minor changes, such as metal hands replacing the original wood for the clocks and the removal of the weathervane due to damage, have occurred. The interior has been painted and air conditioning has required duct work to be added. Almost all of the original lighting fixtures remain. The structure's exterior was cleaned in 1967.

The City of Richmond has a large number of original linen drawings produced during this period. Many of Myers' drawings in varying degrees of condition are available as well as the design drawings of Wait and Cutter and an unknown competitor. Construction drawings produced between 1887 and 1894 show water pipes, gas pipes, structural beams and other aspects of the building. These are generally just dated and probably done by the City with the exception of the electrical plans by Southern. Fifty-eight drawings have been located to date.

An early etching by the Moss Eng. Co. NY (no date) exists as do some photographs (Virginia State Museum and Valentine Museum, both Richmond).

HISTORICAL INFORMATION: PART II

The Richmond City Hall occupies an entire downtown block, bounded on the west by 10th Street, on the east by 11th Street, on the south by Capitol Street and on the north, its main facade, by East Broad Street. This building, along with other important structures, such as; Ammi B. Young's Customs House and Thomas S. Stewart's St. Paul's Church helps frame the broad green square occupied primarily by Jefferson's Capitol which is directly to the south of the City Hall.

The Richmond City Hall is a massive gray granite pile of four principal stories. The exterior is decorated with a profusion of carefully executed Gothic detail, typical of the style, High Victorian Gothic. Its ground level measures 170 feet by 140 feet and the clock tower rises 195 feet above the pavement. Supporting the City Hall's floors, slate, metal and mansard roof are some two million cubic feet of exterior stone walls and five million bricks in the interior walls, supplemented by cast iron columns. Floors are of flat-arch clay tile construction supported on wrought iron rafters, beams and trusses. Each facade maintains a basic formal symmetry with its central Gothic-style porch entrance and paired bays to either side. The end pavilions are varied in roof treatment utilizing pyramidal and conical capping. The dominant feature in the building's design is the clock tower at the

*Architectural*  
HISTORICAL INFORMATION CONT'D.:

northeast corner with its small spires rising from buttresses below to frame the clock faces and the pyramidal roof. Sub-themes in the motif include the window clusters of two and three openings spaced by short unfluted Gothic columns with voluted capitals enriched with foliage. Segmental-pointed arches as well as lancet and straight arches span door and window openings. The rich textures of the stone surfaces vary from the rough hewn blocks with their smooth finished edges to the moulded belt courses and corbeled cornices. Carved oak doors lead into the central four-story gallery and skylight that dominates the interior. Against a background of pilasters and paneled wall surfaces on the outer walls of the gallery, are placed inner arcades of lancet and four-centered arches supported by Gothic columns resting on circular and rectangular pedestals. At each level, the cornice, pierced iron balustrading and plaster spandrels have their individual treatment, and this pattern, when combined with the feeling of height created by the shortening of columns height from bottom level to top, forms a rich spectacle matched by few interiors in the country. Just east of the gallery and forming a visual background to it on entering the building from the west is a broad cast iron stair with iron railing pierced in a quatrefoil pattern. The stairway rises in a single flight to the second level and is repeated on every floor. A considerable amount of golden oak paneling used in the gallery as well as in most of court rooms and offices has been painted over but

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enough remains in certain areas to capture the feel of its original appearance. The moulding and trim in these rooms that surround the open gallery is less ornate than elsewhere and the interest here is more on the existence of original filing cabinets, elaborately detailed radiators, electrified gas fixtures and especially on the survival of original marble sinks and brass fixtures in some of the baths.

(Excerpts From NHL Form).

SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

Architectural Drawings: City of Richmond  
58 Original Linen Drawings Between 1884-1894

Early Views: Virginia Fine Arts Museum,  
Valentine Museum

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